

A Phenomenological Study on the Experience of North Korean Refugees

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experience of North Korean refugees living in South Korea. From the analysis of the participants' comments, six essences were identified: entrance to a new world after struggling for survival, unexpected shock and chaos, reconsidering the reasons for leaving North Korea, recovery from trauma, rebuilding meaning, and posttraumatic growth.

Keywords: *North Korean refugees; recovery factors; trauma*

In the early 1990s only a handful of North Korean refugees arrived in South Korea, but by the year 2000, with the death of Kim IL Sung, and a number of natural disasters in North Korea, the number of refugees there has increased to over a 1,000 per year. In 2006 that number was over 2,000. Because this only represents the documented cases, it is thought that the actual number is much higher. Kim (2007) also suggested that approximately 30,000 to 300,000 North Korean refugees have escaped into China.

In studies many North Korean refugees have reported significant psychological trauma (Kim, 2006; Jeon, 2005). These studies document that North Korean refugees experienced shock and psychological suffering. Many reported that they had suffered from tremendous psychological distress while in North Korea, and again when they crossed the border to a third country, like South Korea. It is also thought that pre-migration trauma negatively affects post-migration adjustment in South Korea. The lingering effects of pre-migration trauma often remained unresolved after leaving North Korea. The continued psychological burden for the refugees was added to the acculturation stress, discrimination, loneliness, and economic difficulties that many experienced in South Korea. Their situation and background problems at the time of their arrival in turn made their adjustment more difficult.

According to a study by Hong (2004), many North Korean refugees in South Korea suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He reported that after 3 years in South Korea, the number of refugees with

partial PTSD had decreased from 31.8% to 5.3%, while those who meet the full criteria for PTSD went from 27.2% to 4%. According to Hong (2004), 88.8% of those refugees with PTSD or partial PTSD recovered by the end of the 3-year study period. Their finding suggested that time is an important factor in recovery. But Tedeschi and Calhoun (1999) reported that time itself is not the healer.

Unlike refugees in the West or in Southeast Asia, North Korean refugees seem to go through a different healing process in South Korea. Other recovery factors need to be considered in order to better understand their experience and to guide program development. There have only been a few studies that consider the social-cultural context. The aim of this study was to explore recovery factors other than time in light of the psychological trauma among North Korean refugees within their post-migration socio-cultural context.

Research Question

The research question was: What was the experience of North Korean refugees?

Method

A phenomenological method was used to explore this question. Essences are illuminated from a comprehensive description drawn from the comments of the participants.

Essences for Husserl (1925/1977) belong to the everyday experiencing of the world. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1995) defined phenomenology as the study of such essences. These essences are seen here as making up the structure of the meaning of the experience of trauma and trauma recovery.

The researchers participated in a self-help meeting for adult refugees once a month and volunteered to help young adult refugees in Seoul learn English. From these groups 2 men and 3 women agreed to participate in this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected from January to November 2006. The sources of data were from in-depth interviews and various personal records of the participants, including their travel diaries, a book, e-mail correspondences, and family interviews. In order to collect sufficient data, each participant was interviewed from 5 to 10 times. Each interview session lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. Before each interview, the researchers explained the purpose of the study, how the participant's anonymity would be protected, and the right to refuse to answer any question or stop participating at any time. All participants signed the written consent form.

Analysis and Findings

The participants were ages 20 to 39. The group was comprised of 2 university students, 2 housewives, and 1 pre-medicine student. They were in South Korea for between 6 months and 6 years. The researchers collected 462 organized comments from all the transcribed interviews and the other sources described above. In the analysis, the data were categorized into six essences. The six essences were: entry into a new society after struggling for survival, unexpected shock and chaos, reconsidering the reasons for leaving their homeland, recovery from trauma, rebuilding of meaning, and posttraumatic growth. These six essences were categorized by grouping the statements from the interviews and other sources. The authors were also able to identify in the participants' comments four factors that the participants saw as affecting their recovery. These factors are labeled: personal factors, religious factors, social factors, and mental health factors.

The researchers found that it was possible for North Korean refugees to experience post-traumatic personal growth through positive coping resources, even after suffering considerable psychological trauma and post-migration distress from unexpected shock and chaos. The severe stressors and traumas discussed by the refugees were: acculturation stress, distress of living in a place where the dominant dialect and culture is different, denial

of self-identity, the competitiveness of a new society, and difficulty in trusting and understanding South Koreans.

Discussion

Because of the political situation in North Korea persons who leave the country without government permission are seen as defectors. The reasons for their defection were often to avoid persecution, starvation, war, torture, imprisonment, and terror. Because of this, being a refugee is a very different experience from being an immigrant. Refugees' departures were often sudden and forced by significant threats. The participants reported having little time to prepare for life in the new country. In addition, it is usually impossible for refugees to return to their homeland (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Procter, 2005).

The participants in this study described their traumatic experiences in North Korea and China, and the difficulties involved in crossing the border into Korea. The refugees said that starvation, political persecution, forced marriages, and separation from families were common.

Participants who went to China before South Korea were classified as illegal aliens, and they lived in constant fear of being caught and returned to North Korea. Those who were returned to North Korea faced persecution as traitors, which often involved imprisonment in unsanitary and disgraceful prisons. Participants also reported that those who returned to North Korea were subject to forced labor, rape, constant observation, starvation, and other tortures while in prison. Understandably many sought to escape, this time to South Korea.

Settling down and starting a new life in South Korea was described by the participants as stressful. They experienced cultural shock and chaos because life in South Korea was so different from life in North Korea. After official entry into South Korea, they had training to help them adjust to life in South Korea. The 3-month training program was at Ha-Na-Won, an institute for North Korean refugees. While they experienced relief and new hope, they were also overwhelmed by the differences. Although North and South Korea share the same language, the participants said that the dialect in South Korea was quite different from what they were used to and this was a barrier in communication. They also felt there was discrimination against North Koreans in South Korea. They saw the discrimination as a form of rejection of the political, ideological, and cultural aspects of North Korea. The participants reported that they tried not to reveal their origin to South Koreans, at least initially.

It is now clear that many North Korean refugees come to South Korea with PTSD from their pre-migration

trauma. They connected their experiences of feeling depressed to their experiences of being imprisoned. Some of the symptoms among the participants were flashbacks, psychosomatic problems, and seizures. Married participants who left children in North Korea or China experienced additional losses and separation stress.

After they realized how difficult and how long it would take to assimilate into South Korean society, the participants admitted to having some regrets about their decision to defect. The periods of loneliness and alienation of living without their family made them wish they could return to their homeland. The participants told the researchers that they re-evaluated their reasons for leaving North Korea. The participants drew on personal, social, religious, and mental health assets to help them manage in their new homes and to recover from what they had experienced. One personal factor used by participants was a conscious effort to detach from being a North Korean. This could be seen as defense against being reminded of painful experiences that they had while in North Korea. This strategy was more commonly used during the early stages of their migration experience. The North Korean refugees also sought to repair their disintegrated family relationships by sending money and calling family members in North Korea. They also offered ways to help their families escape from North Korea. Such efforts to re-integrate families played an important role in the recovery of psychological trauma in a study by Weine and colleagues (2004).

According to the participants, North Koreans reached out to the South Korean's for help. They opened their hearts to them and tried to make a strong network with South Koreans. According to Herman (1997), "psychological recovery only takes place in the context of therapeutic relationships" (p. 133). In this study, a connection with South Koreans was seen as an important recovery factor for psychological trauma. Participants also reported feeling some relief from their distress in South Korea by recalling how they suffered in North Korea and in China.

In this study, a social recovery factor was experienced when North Korean refugees experienced feeling better after obtaining some form of instrumental or emotional support from South Koreans. But as time went by in South Korea, the participants recognized the limits of their connections and support from the South Koreans. So the participants made efforts to contact family and friends in North Korea. The participants said that sharing their experiences helped them feel better about themselves.

Because the participants said that religion had not been part of their lives while in communist North Korea, and that they learned about religion at the Ha-Na-Won

program, it was included in this study as a separate recovery factor. The participants said that they began to go to church as a way to help their adjustment to life in South Korea. In this study, mental health factors were seen in the participants' efforts to resolve their problems and suffering with drinking alcohol and taking drugs. Some even had suicidal thoughts. Depression was a common experience for the participants who had been imprisoned.

These four factors (personal, social, religious, and mental health) had an impact on participants' recovery. These are connected to their efforts to find new meaning in the South. The North Korean refugees in this study all made comments suggesting that they experienced post-traumatic growth. This finding suggested that it is possible to assist North Korean refugees who experienced PTSD. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1999) described post-traumatic growth as "awakening new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, appreciation of life, and spiritual change" (p.73). Park, Cohen, and Murch (1996) labeled such growth as stress-related growth. Armeli, Gunther, and Cohen (2001) identified 7 dimensions of stress-related growth: "affective growth, religious growth, treatment of others, personal strength, belongingness, self-understanding, and optimism" (pp. 392-393). They described these factors as ways to struggle with adversity. In this study the researchers consider them adversarial growth. It is through this process of struggling with adversity that change arises and propels individuals to a higher level of functioning (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies (Harvey, Carlson, Huff, & Green, 2001; Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1999) in that the experience of psychological trauma does not always have a long-term negative impact on mental health. Despite this finding, clinicians need to be aware that many of the participants' memories and emotions related to pre-migration psychological trauma and post-migration distress remain, as does their vulnerability to additional stress and depression. The researchers suggested that it would be helpful to use the eco-systemic and empowering models as described by Papadopoulos (2001) for North Korean refugees, rather than deficient models.

Conclusions

The present study explored North Korean refugees' experiences of trauma and distress, as well as their post-traumatic growth. The study categorized comments of the participant's into four recovery factors (personal, social, religious, and mental health).

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